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ABSTRACT

Despite its growing prominence as a political reform strategy, it is still unclear whether deliberation, with its emphasis on an inclusive process where citizens and politicians listen to each other and are open to persuasion, is a feasible strategy for engaging citizens in public education. This paper explores the feasibility of practical deliberation using a comparative case study of a deliberative experiment in South Carolina. Reconnecting Schools was intentionally designed to be deliberative and represents a good test of whether a diverse group of citizens can come together to discuss what kind of community and schools they want, formulate a plan for furthering those goals, and then take action. Although it is too soon to make a final assessment, the Reconnecting experience suggests that deliberative forums can be more inclusive than conventional venues for citizen participation in education politics, and that diverse participants can discuss controversial issues in an open and civil fashion. However, the enduring challenge of bringing the disenfranchised to the table and sustaining effective participation over the long term remains. Nevertheless, the Reconnecting experiment represents a promising strategy for engaging a broad segment of the community in the work of educating children. An appendix contains Reconnecting agreements. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/RT)

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PRACTICAL DELIBERATION IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS: A SOUTH CAROLINA EXPERIMENT[1]

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Abstract

Despite its growing prominence as a political reform strategy, it is still unclear whether deliberation, with its emphasis on an inclusive process where citizens and politicians listen to each other and are open to persuasion, is a feasible strategy for engaging citizens in public education. This paper explores the feasibility of practical deliberation using a comparative case study of a deliberative experiment in South Carolina.

Reconnecting Schools was intentionally designed to be deliberative and represents a good test of whether a diverse group of citizens can come together to discuss what kind of community and schools they want, formulate a plan for furthering those goals, and then take action. Although it is too soon to make a final assessment because the process is not yet complete, the Reconnecting experience suggests that deliberative forums can be more inclusive than conventional venues for citizen participation in education politics, and that diverse participants can discuss controversial issues in an open and civil fashion. However, the enduring challenge of bringing the disenfranchised to the table and sustaining effective participation over the long term remains. Nevertheless, the Reconnecting experiment represents a promising strategy for engaging a broad segment of the community in the work of educating children.

Introduction

Deliberation, with its emphasis on an inclusive process where citizens and politicians listen to each other and are open to persuasion, holds great appeal for those concerned about partisan gridlock, citizens' declining trust in government, and their disengagement from public institutions such as schools. However, skeptics maintain that true deliberation is infeasible. They argue that because deliberation is time consuming and difficult, few citizens will want to engage in it. Furthermore, the existing imbalance in financial and political resources means that not all those

[1] We are grateful to Diane Johnson, Robert Ream, and William Ford for their assistance in collecting the data for this project. We owe a tremendous debt to the Reconnecting Schools participants for their willingness to allow us to observe their deliberations, and for their thoughtful responses to our many questions. We especially appreciate the assistance of Ellen Henderson of the South Carolina School Boards Association, who served as our guide through Reconnecting and helped us understand South Carolina and its politics.

with a stake in a particular policy will have equal access to deliberative opportunities. The arguments have considerable merit: The public does have limited time and attention to devote to politics, and citizens do not typically have equal standing and access to decision-making arenas.

The force of these concerns is not to invalidate the aspiration to public deliberation, however, but rather to press proponents of the idea to take a closer and more skeptical look at its suitability in different arenas and for resolving different political issues. One way to begin that task is through empirical research that examines a variety of deliberative forums, and asks two basic questions:

1. How well do they measure up to the process norms of democratic deliberation?

The theoretical literature (e.g., Bohman, 1996; Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) suggests four basic standards that should define any deliberative space:

- ***Inclusiveness.*** Access to deliberative opportunities is open and relatively costless. This means that differences between groups or interests in their material resources should not be a barrier to obtaining relevant information or articulating claims and concerns. It also entails that those responsible for assuring the fairness of the deliberative forum may need to seek out representatives to speak for otherwise excluded interests whose views are relevant to resolving an issue.

- ***Equal standing.*** All participants have equal standing in the process; the right to speak of one's own interests is integrally tied to the responsibility to listen to others with as much empathy and understanding as possible. Implied in this principle and the next one is that discourse will be conducted in a civil manner. This tenet also assumes that since possessing material resources is unrelated to the deservingness of one's claims, no interest or claimant should lose on all questions.

- ***Open-mindedness.*** Participants' preferences are not fixed, but can develop and change through the course of the discussion. Issues are considered and resolved on their merits, rather than on the balance of resources or bargaining strategies.

- ***Credibility.*** The deliberative process should have the authority to make final decisions about policy, or at least have a formal, institutionalized channel to the arena in which final policy choices are made; and the deliberative process should be institutionalized in the sense that its advice could not be easily ignored or its authority rescinded.

2. What are the major dimensions along which deliberative forums vary in their process and outcomes?

In addressing the second question, one can imagine a variety of different ways to distinguish among deliberative forums—for example, by the number of participants, by whether they are experimental or ongoing, by whether they are focused on a particular policy decision or more broadly on the public life of an entire community. In beginning to formulate a typology, we approach the task in the same way as a number of other researchers (e.g., Cook & Jacobs, nd; Fung & Wright, 1999; Weeks, forthcoming) and focus on the purposes of deliberative forums and their outcomes. However, within these parameters, we concentrate on three dimensions along which deliberative forums may vary that we believe are particularly relevant to the use of deliberation in public policymaking. These dimensions are depicted in Figure 1.

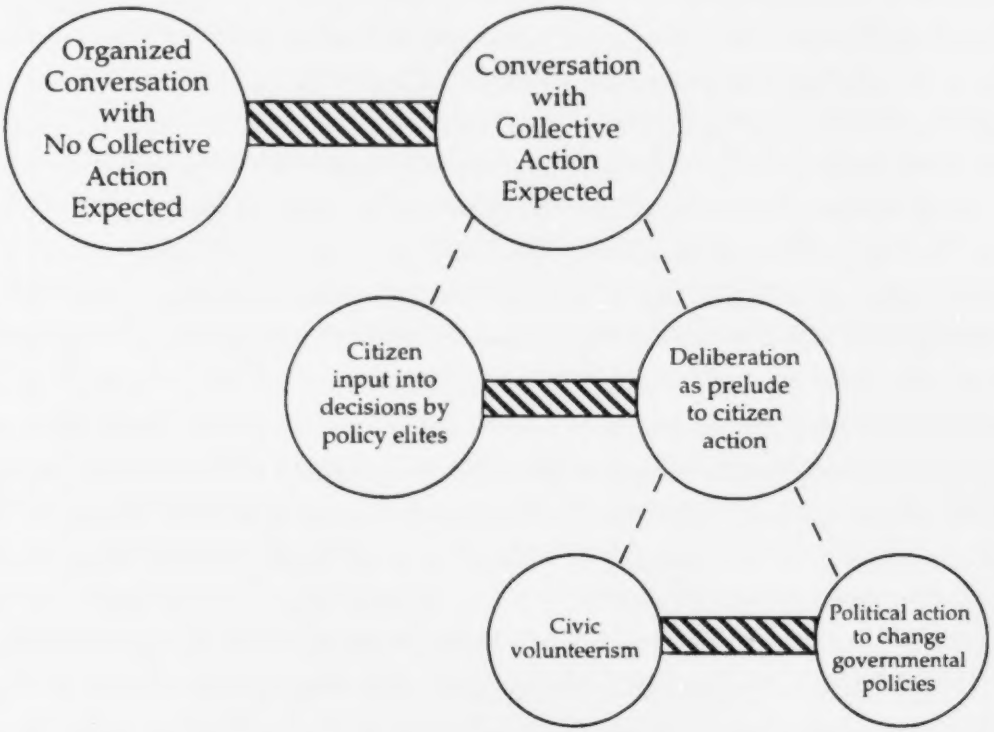
Organized Conversation with No Collective Action Expected
Conversation with Collective Action Expected
Citizen input into decisions by policy elites
Deliberation as prelude to citizen action
Civic volunteerism
Political action to change governmental policies

Figure 1. Deliberative forums as conversation plus action: Some dimensions of variation.

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The first is whether a deliberative forum is designed primarily as an organized conversation where the primary goal is for participants to exchange views and ideas, or whether some type of collective action is also supposed to follow from the conversation. Some deliberative polls and issue forums fit the former category; there is an expectation that change will occur, but at the individual level with no assumption that participants will engage in any collective activity, and the effect on policymaking is assumed to be only indirect. In those instances, where the intent is conversation plus collective action, a second source of variation is whether the deliberative forum has been designed to provide citizen input into decisions made by policy elites, or whether the forum is meant to formulate actions that citizens will take on their own. In those instances, where the product of the deliberative forum is citizen action, a third source of variation is whether that action comes in the form of civic volunteerism or political action aimed at changing governmental policies.

Although we would argue that these three dimensions each depict major distinctions among deliberative forums, they do not represent mutually exclusive categories. So, for example, a particular forum might be intended mainly for citizen input into elite decisions, but it might also lead to greater civic volunteerism. Similarly, the outcome of a forum might be both civic volunteerism and greater or more focused public pressure for state action.[2] In fact, in using these three dimensions to construct models of "practical deliberation," each needs to be seen as representing a continuum along which real world models are likely to fall.

We hope eventually to build a typology of models of practical deliberation based on our own research and that of others. However, in this paper, our goal is more modest. We use a comparative case study of a deliberative experiment in South Carolina to begin to answer our two research questions—viz., how well do real-world models measure up to the normative standards of deliberation, and what can we learn from focusing on variation in the purposes and outcomes of deliberative forums? The cases we examine are not pure examples of different purposes and outcomes. Rather than anchoring the end points on several continua,

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[2] We also recognize that there is not always a sharp distinction between deliberative forums designed to provide input into decisions by policy elites (e.g., through town meetings on proposed legislation where policymakers interact with citizens, rather than just hear testimony) and forums where citizens decide to press for government action through lobbying, study groups, and the like. However, it does seem that the two differ in the level and type of citizen action, with the latter requiring greater involvement and collective, rather than individual, action. They also vary in the balance of control between policy elites and citizens in shaping an outcome, with public officials having greater control in the first type and citizens in the second.

they fall at different points somewhere in the middle of them. The cases we examine were designed to be examples of one set of characteristics: citizens coming together to decide what actions to take, largely through forms of civic volunteerism. Yet the story here is about how a single template was adapted in several local communities in ways that varied both the structure of the deliberative process and the outcome, with these differences largely explained by elements in the local context.

The Reconnecting Experiment

Reconnecting Schools, a pilot project now occurring in three communities in South Carolina, was intentionally designed to be deliberative. It grew out of conversations among Evelyn Berry, the executive director of the South Carolina Schools Boards Association (SCSBA), Gil Thelan, until recently the executive editor of South Carolina's major newspaper (*The State*), and Barbara Nielson, who was State Superintendent of Education between 1990 and 1998. All three had become concerned about what they perceived to be public disengagement from the schools, and had read and discussed David Mathews' *Is There a Public for the Public Schools?* (1996) and Robert Putnam's "Bowling Alone" (1995). Thelan also brought a strong civic journalism perspective to the discussions because he had been active in the efforts of the Knight-Ridder chain (*The State's* owner) to adopt civic journalism principles as a general philosophy for all its newspapers (i.e., moving away from controversy as the major way to frame articles; writing stories from a grassroots, community focus; providing more in-depth, sustained coverage of community issues).

As a first step, Nielson commissioned Public Agenda to conduct a telephone survey in 1997 of a state-representative sample of the public, a mail survey of economic, civic, and political leaders, and a series of focus groups of public school parents, non-parents, teachers, high school students, and business people who hire those students. Respondents were asked about their overall evaluation of the public schools, what they saw as major problems, and about possible solutions and prospects for change. Public Agenda found that across all these groups, there was a strong sentiment that the schools were not performing as well as they should, with only 37% of the general public rating the schools as doing an excellent or good job. Leaders were even more critical of the schools than the general public, but they shared similar concerns about the schools' lack of accountability for student performance, the inequitable distribution of resources across schools, and the

schools' inability to enforce discipline and ensure safety. Although the Public Agenda data suggested that the public was willing to pay more for schools if there were greater accountability, it also indicated that many parents felt the schools were not as welcoming or responsive as they ought to be (Immerwahr, 1997).

This survey, along with a workshop the State Department of Education held with business and education leaders and the South Carolina School Boards Association's (SCSBA) strategic planning exercises, led to the initiation of the Reconnecting project. The template for Reconnecting was relatively straightforward, but it represented an innovative approach to public engagement in education. In each community, a series of public meetings would be held under the auspices of a steering committee comprised of citizens selected by the school district as broadly representative of the community, but who would operate independently of the school district. At the meetings, participants would be asked to discuss their aspirations for the community, what keeps people apart and what brings them together in the community, and what role the schools should play in the community. After completion of the public meetings, the steering committee would select 50 citizens reflecting the demographics of the district in terms of ethnicity, age, social class, residence, and parental status to come together in a "Community Conversation" to forge an "agreement" that would outline what they hope different segments of the local area would do to reconnect schools with the community. The expectation was that the public meetings would begin soon after the start of the school year in fall 1998, and the entire process, including several sessions of the Community Conversations, would be completed some time in early 1999. The process would be structured, but open-ended in terms of its outcomes.

The State Department of Education funded the project, with the School Boards Association taking responsibility for organizing it. SCSBA was assisted by the Harwood Group, a national consulting firm that specializes in a variety of public engagement projects. Harwood designed the overall template for Reconnecting and the materials to be used in the public meetings and Community Conversations. Its staff also trained the steering committee members and, along with staff from the SCSBA, were available to consult with and assist the local steering committees.

SCSBA initially asked ten school districts in the state to participate, and four agreed to do so. Districts were required to meet two conditions. First, the majority of the school board had to agree to the district's participation. The district's financial contribution was expected to be small (about $15,000 for mailings, facility rentals,

and other steering committee expenses), but SCSBA wanted to make certain that the school board would take the initiative seriously. Second, the local newspaper had to agree to chronicle the entire process. Here, the expectation was that the newspaper would not be a sponsor of the initiative, but would rather act as a "committed observer," reporting on the process from beginning to end, whether or not it generated any news in the traditional sense. The school boards in districts that decided not to participate offered a variety of reasons—for example, the lack of a definite outcome to the process, a belief that the board was already adequately responsive to the public, a concern that the newspaper would not participate in the way expected. In one district that initially agreed to participate, the School Boards Association decided that the situation was not conducive to productive deliberation because Board members were divided among themselves and against the superintendent, and there was no third party sufficiently trusted to assume the convening function and appoint the steering committee.

The four districts that agreed to participate are Greenville County in the northern part of the state, Richland 2 and Lexington 5 located in the Columbia metropolitan area, and Horry County in the northeastern corner of the state. Although each district differs in its politics and school-community relations, and each implemented Reconnecting in very different ways, the four communities share some important characteristics. Each is located in a growing area that is attracting many newcomers who are contributing to changes in traditional community boundaries and relations among races and classes. These school districts are also among the larger in the state, and each has a staff person in the central office responsible for public or community relations who could serve as a liaison to the Reconnecting steering committee.[3]

These are also diverse communities, at least by South Carolina standards. For example, Horry County includes the affluent beach communities around Myrtle Beach, but it also includes the tobacco farms in Aynor and Green Sea-Floyds. Similarly, the Greenville area is home to a large BMW plant and the North American headquarters of Michelin, but it also includes rural communities at the southern end of the county and up near the North Carolina border. Richland 2 is an urban-

[3] Greenville is the largest of the 86 school districts in South Carolina, enrolling 59,000 students in a county with a 1995 population of 340,000. Horry enrolls 27,500 students with a countywide population of 158,000. Richland 2, one of two school districts in Richland county (population 290,000) enrolls about 16,000 students. Lexington 5 (enrollment 14,500) is one of five school districts in Lexington county, population 192,000.

suburban district with an equal enrollment of Black and White students (about 48% for each group), and with about 30% of its students receiving free or reduced price lunches. Lexington 5 is the most homogenous district, an affluent suburb that prides itself on having the highest student test scores in the state.

Its creators hoped that the Reconnecting process would engage "new voices, people who don't usually get involved [with the schools]." The organizers often mentioned the comment of one of the local newspaper editors, who expressed the hope that Reconnecting would involve more than just the "frequent fliers" who routinely attend school board meetings to press their own agendas. They envisioned the process as helping participants "cross the threshold into public life," and as allowing people to come together and discuss schools in a different way. The organizers were less clear about what they expected in the agreements, although they hoped that they would provide some kind of blueprint for citizen action. As the Reconnecting process began, organizers talked about the agreements in the following ways:

> The product should be social change, and change in how people talk about things and in how they think about citizenship. It should start a ball rolling, though I don't know whether that ball will be going down a hill or off the side of the mountain.
>
> ****
>
> The agreement will outline what people want for the community and how that should be handled. But it will likely leave something to educators. The largest piece is what people involved in the conversation are willing to do themselves, as long as others are doing something also, including elected leaders. It's like a compact. . . .
>
> The agreement might just be about getting people to talk to each other on the street—baby steps. After all, this is a different process that is designed to grow from the community, rather than focus on a particular topic.

To a considerable degree, the organizers' aspirations for the Reconnecting process were met: The steering committees in three of the four districts were able to involve several hundred people in the public meetings, and to lead the Community Conversation participants to produce an agreement. Consequently, we can analyze the extent to which Reconnecting met the normative process standards of democratic deliberation. However, implementation of the three agreements is just beginning in each of the three communities, so it is too early to assess the effectiveness of Reconnecting's outcomes. Nevertheless, even at this stage, the Reconnecting experience, particularly the variation that emerged across the four

communities, has much to tell us about deliberative forums as mechanisms for engaging citizens in discussions that lead to civic action.

Research Methods

Our analysis is based on multiple data sources: face-to-face interviews with 51 Reconnecting participants, including the SCSBA and Harwood organizers, steering committee members, Community Conversation participants, school district officials, and newspaper staff; attendance at two public meetings, four Community Conversations, and two steering committee debriefings; and a review of a variety of documentary sources (the materials prepared by Harwood, the local publicity materials, all the newspaper articles on Reconnecting, and the final agreements).[4] These data were collected during six trips to South Carolina between May 1998 and September 1999.

Even though we have a substantial collection of rich data—especially the interviews with participants, some of whom we talked with several times—we lack comparable information on each site. The major reason was simply the nature of Reconnecting: The local steering committees all modified the schedule proposed by the organizers, and sometimes changed the dates of meetings on very short notice.[5] In addition, we had originally planned to study only Greenville and Lexington 5. However, when the steering committee in Lexington 5 suspended the process in the face of low attendance at the public meetings, we decided to replace it with Horry County as a site for intensive data collection. As differences across the sites became more obvious, we also decided to collect limited data on Richland 2 after it had

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[4] The interviews were conducted using a structured, but open-ended, protocol and typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Because of concerns about disrupting a process that was supposed to be informal and safe for participants unaccustomed to the public spotlight, no audio or video recordings were made of any of the Reconnecting meetings. Consequently, we took comprehensive notes of what was said by each speaker and the facilitators. We also talked informally with participants before and after the meetings and at breaks to get a sense of how they were viewing the meetings as they were occurring. We took similar notes at the steering committee debriefings we attended.

[5] For example, we thought we were attending the fourth and final Community Conversation in Horry County. However, towards the end of the meeting, the participants decided that they could not finish the agreement that night, and asked for an additional meeting several weeks later. During the interim, participants gathered more information on what the school district was already doing and refined their own recommendations for action. Consequently, we had to arrange to send another member of the research team to observe the final meeting and interview participants.

produced an agreement.[6] As a result, we have very complete data on Greenville and Horry Counties, and considerably less on the other two sites.

For several reasons, this study should be considered exploratory with only limited generalizability. First, Reconnecting is an ongoing pilot project where the first phase was always in considerable flux, with both the organizers and local steering committees modifying and redesigning it as they went along, and where the final outcome is also unclear to organizers and participants alike. Consequently, although we used semi-structured interview guides, and tried to collect comparable data from each site, we were constantly adapting to changing circumstances. In addition, although participants were most hospitable, cooperative, and forthcoming in their interactions with us, the steering committee in one site was concerned that our interviews with Community Conversation participants might disrupt a fragile process. Therefore, in that site, we observed meetings, but did not interview participants until after they had reached an agreement.

A second limit on generalizability is the nature of South Carolina. It is a small state where race and class are major public concerns, but a number of other issues such as language and culture that shape public life in larger, more heterogeneous states are only beginning to appear on educational and political agendas. Although its full impact is difficult to measure, we also sensed that religion plays a much stronger role in South Carolina as a form of "civic glue" than it does in more secular states outside the deep South.[7]

Finally, the major limit on generalizability is Reconnecting's status as a pilot project and the exploratory nature of our study. Although school boards in New Jersey and Ohio are now considering adopting Reconnecting, and the SCSBA and Harwood plan to develop components of Reconnecting ("portable pieces") that can be used in smaller districts without daily newspapers, it remains a work in progress that continues to be shaped as much by its grassroots implementers as by its designers and where the final outcome is unknown. Similarly, our study of

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[6] In May 1999, we interviewed the steering committee chair and the school district liaisons. In September 1999, we followed up with the school district liaison and also interviewed the newspaper reporter who had covered Reconnecting throughout the entire process. We also have copies of all the newspaper articles and the final agreement.

[7] The role of religion in civic life and in the Reconnecting process merits a separate discussion, but it was present in every site in a variety of forms—e.g., in who was included in the Community Conversations, in where public meetings were held and how participants were recruited, in what topics were discussed, and in how participants viewed the role of the churches in shaping and supporting the schools.

Reconnecting identified a number of questions that we had not even considered after reading the theoretical literature and that allowed us to understand in great depth how a particular deliberative model can work in practice. However, the lessons and implications of Reconnecting are only suggestive until it is implemented in a number of different state and local contexts.

In the next section, we analyze how well the Reconnecting process worked as a deliberative forum, and in the subsequent section, we examine the major dimensions along which the Reconnecting pilots varied and the sources of that variation. In doing so, we focus primarily on the experience of Greenville and Horry Counties, and only incidentally on Richland 2 because of the data limitations.[8]

Meeting the Normative Standards of Democratic Deliberation

We have noted that the Reconnecting initiative was inspired by the national context of concern about the vibrancy of democratic participation in American politics. This concern not only has fostered high hopes for deliberative approaches, it also influenced the design of the Reconnecting process itself. Because South Carolina's experiment in citizen deliberation built on political theorists' ideas and hypotheses about the ideal of deliberative democracy, we can call on that literature to outline the normative standards to which practical deliberation can be compared. In seeking to bridge the theoretical and the practical, we are aware that we will doubtless please neither camp. From the rich, not to say dense, theoretical literature, we focus on only the most central and straightforward criteria, chancing the accusation that we have missed important subtleties. At the same time, our concern with criteria drawn from theoretical models and with process rather than outcomes will test the patience of reformers and policymakers.

In this section, we set out four criteria—inclusiveness, equal standing, open-mindedness, and credibility—briefly noting their roles in defining the theoretical ideal of deliberative democracy,[9] considering how each ideal standard can be

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[8] Observers and participants identified several different reasons why Lexington 5 did not complete the Reconnecting process, including public involvement in a district strategic planning process and several task forces that diverted participation away from Reconnecting; strong parental identity with a particular school, but not with the larger community or school district; an inexperienced steering committee; and spotty coverage by the newspaper.

[9] In seeking to define the core concept of deliberative processes, we have relied particularly on Bohman (1996), Gutmann and Thompson (1996) and Bessette (1994). Two excellent recent collections that elaborate and develop these ideas are Bohman and Rehg (1997) and Elster (1998).

applied in a practical political context, and then describing how the Reconnecting process measured up against these criteria.

Inclusiveness

The ideal of inclusiveness is honored in virtually every theory of democratic politics, typically by way of procedural provisions assuring equal opportunity to participate. The deliberative ideal puts even stronger emphasis on this fundamental condition, however. If deliberation is to achieve its aspiration of improving the quality and legitimacy of collective decisions, then the path to that achievement must pass through all the interests and beliefs relevant to the decision. This stronger standard enjoins the would-be organizers of a deliberative forum to take special cognizance of the way voluntary public participation in local associations is ordinarily channeled and structured by status differences (relating, for instance, to class, race, gender, or neighborhood) and the potential for consensual norms of public participation to lend unintended advantages to those who are more articulate or aggressive in pressing their views. At the very beginning, the process of setting up the discussion must go beyond offering (and publicizing) the opportunity to participate; the process needs to involve efforts to invite or even recruit people who might otherwise not feel welcome to participate but who are concerned about issues that are not represented among mainstream activists.

In setting out on the Reconnecting initiative, the South Carolina School Boards Association appears to have been sensitive to the challenge of inclusiveness. Indeed, one of the pressing symptoms that had originally stimulated interest in alternative forms of participation and decision making was the palpable sense, particularly among state education officials and some media observers, that the connection between the public and the schools was fraying, and that nominal opportunities to participate in public hearings and school board meetings were not viewed as effective channels of representation or influence by most people. In each of the four sites, the organizers sought to bring in a wide range of participants and interests.

Although the organizers in all the Reconnecting districts saw the goals of inclusiveness and wide representation as essential aspects of the initiative, their pursuit of these goals differed from place to place, depending on local history and circumstances. Contacting and recruiting people to serve on the steering committee was a formative first step, and the process was carried out with careful thought and a good deal of flexibility in each of the districts. The districts followed Harwood's

recommendations for identifying a socially diverse group of people who were bridges to different community networks. In both Greenville and Horry, the superintendents and their staffs canvassed civic and community leaders to identify people who were active in local organizations and communities, but who were not politicians or "civic notables." In Horry County, representatives from the school district and the newspaper met together to compile a list of people who would be invited to serve on the steering committee. Using various lists of parents and non-parents in the county, they set out rough quotas in terms of education, region of the county and race, and they sought to avoid the natural bias toward activists by omitting people whose names had appeared more than twice in the newspaper over the previous year or so. A personal invitation to join the steering committee was signed by the school superintendent and the publisher of the *Sun News*. In Horry County, 45 people were invited to a meeting with the SCSBA and the newspaper, and 12 volunteered to join the committee; that group was later augmented by people who were asked to facilitate public meetings in their local communities. In Greenville, 29 people were invited to join the committee, and 19 agreed to do so. Some people later dropped out, and a few new members were added.

The Reconnecting districts displayed some striking similarities, in several respects. The steering committees in three of the four communities were able to complete the process, and to help participants produce an agreement. Each of the steering committees started out with about 20 members, and by the end had a core group of 10 to 12 who devoted much time to the project and were strongly committed to bringing it to a successful conclusion. The members of the steering committee were typically middle to upper middle class and had been moderately active in community issues—they had the resources of time, articulateness, and experience so that they would not have to learn the "ins and outs" of civic involvement anew—but none was identified with any partisan issue in school or community politics. Perhaps what is most remarkable about the steering committees is that few of the members had ever worked together or even knew each other at the beginning of the process, and a sizable group had never been involved in the schools. The members were overwhelmingly White, but each committee included African Americans who played an active role in implementing Reconnecting. Most of the members were small business owners and mid-level managers, but they also included retired people and women who did not work outside the home. Some members had clear economic interests in the quality of the schools (e.g., as

developers, real estate agents, and employers of entry-level workers); some were active in their children's schools, but others accepted the task because they believe that improved education and stronger ties between schools and communities would improve overall civic life.[10]

The task of informing citizens about the Reconnecting process and motivating their participation in it was no small challenge for the steering committees in Horry and Greenville Counties. Both districts are geographically large (Horry's land area is the largest of any county east of the Mississippi), and significant differences of local history, past political events, and traditional relations between local communities and schools distinguished rural from urban, Black neighborhoods from White, and poor neighborhoods from middle-class areas. In Horry County, the steering committee decided early to set up a goodly number of public meetings, rather than to try to draw people together from this large county into a few centralized venues. This was an important decision from the perspective of inclusiveness, because it lowered the threshold for ordinary people to participate, in several ways. First, local meeting places—in churches, schools, community halls—were convenient and familiar. The steering committee felt that residents would be more willing to come and talk about their communities if the meetings were located in what might be considered well-defined, natural communities, and if the groups were relatively small so that everyone would feel comfortable speaking. The 25 meeting sites each represented a community as the steering committee could detect it.[11] The gatherings drew participants from a relatively small catchment area, so that the people who attended found that their neighbors and people like them—rather than public notables—were taking part. Finally, the familiarity of the surroundings fostered participation, helped to support norms against personalizing or demonizing the opposition, and helped to build the confidence of people who were not used to public activity. In addition, the steering committee decided against bringing in a professional facilitator to organize the public meetings, feeling that the familiarity of the participants with local discussion leaders would more than compensate for their inexperience as facilitators.

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[10] When asked why they agreed to join the steering committee, a number of members began their explanation by simply saying "Because I was asked." In subsequent conversation, they indicated that they felt other people would respond like them, if they were only asked and persuaded of the need for their personal participation in a civic project.

[11] Ten of the public meetings were held in schools; other sites included several churches, community centers, a senior citizen center, a technical college, and a community hospital.

Although the organizers in Greenville held fewer meetings, they were keenly aware of the need to draw people in from all parts of the political spectrum and all parts of the county. With a citizenry deeply divided over many local issues, including the full range of political views was no easy task, but the steering committee worked hard to recruit and maintain the commitment of participants with widely varying beliefs and preferences. A member of Greenville's steering committee summed up the accomplishment in this way:

> In this county, there is no such thing as a civil discussion before a civic body, but we were able to do that with Reconnecting. The usual "ranters and ravers" were courteous, and listened to others. We posted the rules, but after a while, we didn't need them. But the rules—even if unspoken—helped to get the ranters to behave differently. This wasn't like meetings of the School Board or other agencies.

Similarly, when the first round of public meetings in Greenville generated relatively little interest in the northern part of the county, the steering committee held off moving immediately to the stage of Community Conversations, and set up an additional round of meetings to bring in participants who might have felt that they did not have an adequate opportunity earlier.

Overall, these decisions appear to have been successful at broadening participation in the local public meetings beyond the usual "frequent flyers" involved in civic and educational issues. Respondents reported that "there was a good representation of lower-middle-class people at the public meetings, some without education. There was a surprising number of people who wouldn't normally have participated in a public project like that." Inclusiveness can be gauged not only by the diversity of participants but also in the range of issues that were brought up and discussed at these gatherings. They ranged from community issues whose impact on the schools was important but indirect, such as the effect of development on the growth and distribution of students throughout the district, and the need for additional tax support for building new schools to meet the increase in demand; to traditional issues relating to the schools such as safety and teacher salaries; and finally to proposals that bridged schools and community, such as the call for keeping the schools open in the evenings and on weekends so that they could be used for community activities and neighborhood association meetings. The range of issues and the ease with which local participants spanned the boundary between traditional jurisdictions of school and community underlined the potential significance for governance of actually acting on the intention of "reconnecting."

The next stage, the Community Conversations, sought to focus the issues and discussion from the many public meetings and to draw together the disparate threads of concerns about schools and communities into a smaller number of ideas that could form the basis for specific community activities or school district policy changes. In Horry County, the steering committee's selection of participants in the Community Conversations was animated by two considerations: first, producing policy-relevant proposals appeared to demand a degree of political experience and sophistication, and second, the success of Reconnecting depended on including local economic influentials as well as ordinary people. Compiling the list of participants for this stage of the process, then, entailed more than simply bringing forward representatives from the local public meetings. The steering committee developed the list of potential participants in the Community Conversations, once again seeking to include a wide range of interests, but now also bringing in participants who represented major employers and developers in the county. It was easy to see that this change in the considerations guiding selection was likely to affect inclusiveness, and the steering committee sought to minimize the impact. To ensure the inclusion of a wide range of concerns, the committee kept careful records of the issues that were raised at the local public meetings, and then listed these issues so that they would be available for inclusion on the agenda at the Community Conversations. Some, but not all, of the issues were carried forward.

In Greenville, the steering committee was more concerned to ensure the continued participation of ordinary people, and they were operating in a civic environment where public authorities and economic notables come in for much more suspicion than is typically the case in Horry County. As one steering committee member put it, "We have to put together a process for how to select the members of the conversation, because we want new voices. For example, we might pick ten people based on their geographic location in the county, ten who are college-educated, ten school people, ten younger people, and use the last ten to balance by race and gender." Moreover, in building on their experience of facilitating the earlier round of public meetings, the committee felt that bringing in a lot of local "movers and shakers" would alienate the "little people" who had been participating, not only undermining the legitimacy of the Reconnecting process by seeming to have "sold out," but also weakening the claim that the process genuinely represented the voices of ordinary people throughout the district. A significant difference between the two districts at this stage, then, was the fact that, in

Greenville County, no local "movers and shakers" were asked to participate in the Community Conversations.

This difference, in turn, had a dramatic effect on the degree to which the process continued to serve as a channel for drawing in citizens who would ordinarily not participate. In Greenville County, the fact that the Conversation participants were selected from the public meetings meant that virtually all the salient issues from the local meetings were carried forward and discussed vigorously in the Community Conversations. In Horry County, a substantial proportion of the participants in the Community Conversations were invited on the basis of their influential role in business or government, and those who moved to the Conversations after attending the earlier public meetings tended to be the more articulate of the local participants. As one observer of the process in Horry County remarked, "Some of these nontraditional participants, maybe most of them, were strained out when it came to the Community Conversations."

The effect on the representativeness of the Community Conversations is difficult to judge with precision, since comparing the outcome to what would have occurred if a different selection mechanism had been employed is inevitably somewhat speculative. It is clear that, in both Horry and Greenville, the Reconnecting process, and specifically the Community Conversations, were considerably more inclusive on virtually every dimension than conventional venues for citizen participation in education politics (e.g., testifying before the school board). On some dimensions, the process was notably successful at maintaining the participation of diverse voices; for instance, parents as well as non-parents, men as well as women, and residents of the districts' cities, large towns and new suburbs as well as rural people participated actively in the Community Conversations.

In Horry County, however, the inclusiveness that had typified the local public meetings on other dimensions declined in significant but sometimes subtle ways. If we compare the Reconnecting process not to conventional channels for public input into school politics but to the ideal of deliberative democracy, the process fell short in terms of both class and race. The numerical dominance of educated, middle-class participants increased with the move to the Community Conversations, and even those few working and lower status people who attended were unlikely to speak up. The outcome for inclusiveness on the dimension of race was more subtle; the proportion of African Americans attending the Community Conversations (around 30%) was nearly identical to the proportion attending district schools, but the

African Americans in attendance were for the most part less likely to speak than their White counterparts, and African American participants who had taken relatively aggressive or radical stances at early meetings tended to drop out and did not continue to participate through the full series of five Community Conversations. This did not necessarily mean that the interests of these groups went completely unrepresented. Indeed one could not help being struck by the extent to which participants attempted to speak for the interests of people or regions of the County that were not present. Nevertheless, most theories of deliberative democracy place strong emphasis on the importance of people speaking for their own concerns, rather than depending on vicarious representation. Several of the participants we interviewed reaffirmed the importance of personal participation; they highlighted the value of personal stories in helping others in the group to grasp and understand the situations of people who differed from them in significant ways, whether this involved having a child with a disability, or being poor, or living in an historically segregated Black neighborhood. Such linkages were especially important in Horry County, one of the largest school districts in the state, where concerting the (countywide) community's resources to help the schools entailed bringing together local towns and communities that were widely separated geographically and socially.

The goal of including ordinary people in the Reconnecting process is undoubtedly one of its most demanding aspirations. The aim of encouraging the active participation of people who seldom take part in community politics, and who may even feel uncomfortable visiting their children's school, is at once ambitious and idealistic. It would be surprising, indeed revolutionary, if the aim had been met the first time out. If success was partial, however, it is nonetheless worth noting. On every dimension, the Reconnecting process did much better than conventional public hearings at motivating the sustained commitment of a wide range of citizens in grappling constructively with how to improve their schools and communities. Compared with the deliberative ideal, however, the substantial success—at involving non-parents and retired people as well as parents, and men as well as women, rural as well as urban and suburban residents—must be ranged along with continuing unresolved challenges of translating opportunity into effective participation for Blacks and for working class and poor citizens across the board.

Equal Standing

The key question to which this criterion points is whether each participant and every relevant interest or concern received a fair hearing in the Reconnecting process. The standard does not entail that no preference is denied, but rather that participants feel that their concerns were heard sympathetically and given appropriate weight in the final decision. But the criterion is not an entirely subjective one, for it implies—at least if we assume that no participant's concerns are *a priori* less worthy than any other participant's—that over the course of multiple decisions the distribution of advantages and disadvantages will even out; that is, the same people will not always turn up winners, nor another set of people consistently lose.

The criterion of equal standing can be thought of as the more demanding "next step" in applying the criterion of inclusion. Here we ask not whether a particular person or the representative of a particular issue is invited to participate, but whether, having a place at the table, each participant can speak out, each interest can be freely and forcefully expressed, and receive due consideration. Procedures that place a premium on adherence to arcane rules or the use of technical jargon, for instance, disadvantage claimants who are inexperienced in the rules of the forum or inexpert in its subject matter—even though such claimants may have concerns that deserve as solicitous consideration as those of more practiced participants. Similarly, to the extent that informal norms or unconscious expectations lead participants to value articulateness or assertiveness, the forum—perhaps quite unintentionally—disadvantages those who lack these skills (typically working class or poor people in a gathering dominated by educated, middle-class participants) or reject more aggressive conversational styles (typically minorities and women in gatherings dominated by White males).[12]

The guidelines and rules that defined the Reconnecting discussions at every stage were clear and strong in placing a high value on ensuring equal standing, and there is no doubt that the steering committee members in every district acknowledged the importance of this value. Moreover, none of the participants we interviewed recalled an instance in which anyone had been denied the right to speak. There were, in other words, no explicit or egregious violations of the right of

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[12] Such inequalities need not be purposively implemented; indeed they probably seldom are and seldom need to be. Because they are often unconscious aspects of conventional practice, guarding against their effects usually requires that the rules and the conversation leaders act affirmatively to foster the participation of less assertive or articulate people or the representatives of less popular concerns and claims. Cf. Bickford (1996); West (1984).

all the participants to express their concerns. It is important to recognize the significance of this achievement, for some of the people who took part in the Reconnecting discussions were convinced on the basis of experience that neither school officials nor local government authorities could be trusted to give their concerns a fair hearing.

And yet in each forum certain issues were neglected or omitted from the agenda, or they were discussed only in vague generalities that avoided potential conflict by failing to register and acknowledge the depth of concern people felt about them. These are instances of "non-decisions," outcomes that are not the result of explicit public choices, but that are worthy of attention precisely because of the absence of explicit consideration in the public forum. But if such issues never come up, or are discussed only in generalities, this could occur for either of two reasons: because no one was really concerned about them, or because there were genuine concerns but they were not acknowledged. To distinguish between these two explanations for the absence of an issue from the agenda, it is necessary to draw on comparative evidence from outside the public forum itself. In this section we draw on such evidence to suggest that the Reconnecting process, for all its notable success as a truly inclusive forum, fell short of the deliberative ideal. We highlight two such instances: the omission of the issue of economic development and its impact on schools from the agenda in Horry County, and the omission of any sustained discussion of racial disparities in educational services and economic opportunity in all three of the districts.

Population growth inevitably has significant impacts on the school system, in many ways. The most obvious and immediate include overcrowding and the need to build new schools. Less apparent but eventually more pressing impacts include increased competition for tax revenues, which not only pits schools against other infrastructure needs such as roads and sewage facilities, but also pits the local government's need for increased revenues against the claim of potential investors for tax reductions and rebates in exchange for new private development. Both Horry and Greenville Counties have experienced dramatic population growth during the decade of the 1990s, and the schools have felt the impacts of this growth keenly. In Greenville, the issue of development was raised early in the local public meetings, and it was one of the most prominent agenda items in the Community Conversations that produced the Reconnecting agreement. The agreement itself is quite ambitious in calling attention to the fact that education has not been "an

integral part of county planning," and calling for the interests of public education to be included in "the overall county growth planning process," in which "school capacity [is to be considered] as a key input similar to water, sewer, and other factors in the formula for planning."

In Horry County, on the other hand, the question of development, which had arisen in many of the local public meetings and which was mentioned at the first Community Conversation, dropped off the agenda by the second Conversation. Different participants and observers had different impressions of the transition by which the focus of conversation was narrowed, but the transition itself was unmistakable. As one participant summarized it, "The conversation seemed to move from 'schools and community' to focus on the schools; this definitely constrained the breadth of ambition that could then be brought into the final agreement." In retrospect, the omission of any substantial discussion of the impact of new development on the schools has become something of an embarrassment. Within a few weeks of the completion of the Reconnecting agreement, the county planning agency gave initial approval to a proposal for a multi-county shopping mall, backed by Horry County's largest commercial real estate development company, a proposal that would have the effect of diverting tax revenues from the schools to building roads and other infrastructure associated with the mall. School officials learned of the proposal only after the approval process was far advanced, and the Superintendent and School Board President have led the effort to gather information about the impact on schools and to get this information to the public and to the County Council and other planning agencies.

The issue of race is perhaps the greatest unresolved challenge to America's promise of equal citizenship; it would hardly be appropriate to judge a local deliberative process by its ability to resolve this deep and national question. At the same time, as one knowledgeable African American respondent in Horry County put it, "The Reconnecting process has the potential to bring people together to talk about difficult issues like race. Racial tensions are heightened when people don't communicate. The process did not live up to its full potential. . . ." A member of the steering committee in Greenville explained that she had joined the Reconnecting effort because "Greenville is a rather segregated community . . . and I don't like to see students slotted according to who they are." She was troubled that, although there were "comments about diversity, but race . . . did not come up." In Horry County, various questions related to racial disparities came up quite frequently in

the local public meetings, ranging from the physical condition of schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods compared with those in mostly White neighborhoods, to differential treatment of Black and White children who act out in class, but these issues were not pursued as discussion topics once the venue shifted to the districtwide Community Conversations. Moreover, after the first of the Community Conversations it seemed that the African American participants were less inclined to insist that the forum acknowledge and discuss the question of race.

Ideas about why the discussion consistently skirted race proposed several quite different explanations. One approach suggested that perhaps the selection of participants in the Community Conversations may account for the absence of the issue. A member of the steering committee in Horry County suggested that "[the issue] wasn't left off altogether—I wouldn't call those who came to later meetings weak at presenting their points—but they were plugged into the establishment and seemed deferential to the prevailing tone of the respectable Whites running the meeting. A lot of those things just go unsaid around here." Another long-time observer of politics and society in Horry County judged that "the failure to grapple with this issue underlies some of the most difficult problems with reconnecting schools and communities in this part of country. . . . [M]ost political issues are refracted through the prism of race. We here in Horry County, and in South Carolina generally . . . , have not yet reached the comfort level we need for candid conversation on this issue." A third participant, an African American from a rural area of the county, had a different suggestion.

> We still have a color barrier here in Horry County. It shows up in a lot of ways. There are people in this county who still have no lights or electricity in their cabins, in the rural areas, and most of those are Black folks. Sports teams [from poor, rural areas] aren't scheduled to play all the teams in the county, not the rich, White schools—our students and parents never have any occasion at all to see how different they are from our facilities. . . . Race and class did come up in the neighborhood meetings; Black people and people in the rural areas pretty much know that they are the poor stepchildren of the county. But these kinds of issues didn't come up very much in the Community Conversations. For instance, I think most people understood what the reason was that [the local rural high school] didn't have a football field, or when [other Black participants] would talk about the need for more funding for neighborhood organizations in poor areas, but we didn't discuss it in those terms. Seems like if those sorts of issues came up, the facilitator would quickly move us along to another point.

Neither Black nor White participants held the Reconnecting process to account for not having made progress on this question. But several, and particularly African American participants, went beyond resignation at the intractability of the issue, to suggest how the Reconnecting initiative could address the issue. Several participants mentioned that the organizers of the process needed to contact and mobilize participation in the Black community along different networks from the ones that worked for the White community. With a more representative cross-section of Black participants, interests and concerns would be more likely to be seriously discussed. A participant in Greenville suggested that the steering committee needed to work "through the churches . . . the fact that there have been very few churches involved with Reconnecting is one of the things [we] need to work on. We need to get the pastors involved, so that they can help bring their flocks along." Another Community Conversation participant in Greenville noted a critical difference in social norms that needed to be taken into account.

> The leaders of an initiative like this have to reach out, especially to assure that a variety of people will take part. You can't expect people to come in on their own—lots of people who have genuine needs don't follow government and politics closely, and, even if they knew about something like Reconnecting, they wouldn't feel like they were included unless they were asked specifically. There's a long tradition in southern politics of people staying away—especially Black people—from mainstream political and social activities. Not being invited means you're not expected to be there. . . .
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> It would be possible to bring in a wider range of participants if the steering committee could reach out and recruit from churches. For instance, in our group, several of the White members of the steering committee had Black friends or business acquaintances and asked them to participate. But this means that the Blacks who participated in Reconnecting had the same sort of jobs and income that the Whites did. Maybe it would have been possible for the Black participants to go back to their churches, and try to bring in some of their friends from church to participate in the meetings. Some of the people we go to church with would have gone to the meetings if they had been asked, and we could have brought them to the meetings.

Given the close relationship between the criterion of inclusion and the criterion of equal standing, it is perhaps no surprise that when we asked respondents whether there were any issues that did not get an adequate hearing, they often framed their answers by thinking about the sorts of people whose effective participation would communicate those sorts of issues. One of the lessons from our observation of practical deliberation in South Carolina school politics is that separating issues and people may distort the meaning of the participation to those

who are actually involved. In the real world, people do not engage in deliberation (or other sorts of political discussion) as unencumbered conversationalists; their identities are bound up with their beliefs and concerns, with their commitments to ideas, issues, and groups. This perhaps obvious fact underlines the challenge posed by the third criterion.

Open-Mindedness and Civil Discussion

Like the criterion of equal standing, this standard points to the aspiration that the deliberative process leads to the resolution of issues on their merits rather than on the basis of material resources, threats, or bargaining under conditions of inequality. By "civil discussion," we call attention to two aspects widely emphasized by deliberative theorists: the substitution of talking for fighting, and the role of public reason. If reasoned argumentation over the merits of different proposals is to guide the eventual decision, then the conditions for civil discussion must be firmly set and sustained, even in the face of what might grow to be severe disagreement. Although the theoretical literature is rich in complicated and lengthy reflections on the procedural conditions and behavioral requisites for the ideal deliberative forum, the rules of practical deliberation, such as those for the neighborhood meetings in the Reconnecting process, center on respectfulness in speech and listening. The rationale is reciprocity in an ongoing conversation: The right to speak entails the responsibility to listen attentively and respectfully to other speakers; respectfulness is shown by responding thoughtfully to others' comments. The concept of public reason refers to the requirement that the reasons offered for one's claims must be ones that others could find acceptable—reasons, that is, that might appeal to any other reasonable person. This criterion obviously rules out the self-interest of the speaker as the reason why others should assent to the speaker's claims, but it also rules out appeals to religious or other doctrines that are not universally shared. By grounding the premises of legitimate argumentation in appeals that look beyond selfish interests or special doctrines, the idea of public reason seeks to orient the process of framing choices and advocating alternatives toward the good of the larger community rather than the advantage of any particular segment. The notion of open-mindedness supplements the idea of civil discourse, emphasizing again the reciprocal rights and responsibilities of speaking and listening, and it specifically calls attention to learning and change as practical indicators of respectful listening. People show their commitment to the deliberative process by their willingness to listen with an open mind; they show their open-mindedness by occasionally

changing their beliefs or preferences in light of good reasons that have been offered by others.

The organizers of the Reconnecting process realized that maintaining a civil discussion would be one of their primary challenges. Well before contacting the Harwood Group or even talking about the idea for Reconnecting with district administrators around the state, the State Schools Superintendent and the head of the state School Boards Association were concerned that the rise of vitriolic attacks on the schools by interest group leaders and some politicians and the angry and often uninformed content of talk radio shows might make it impossible to rebuild reasoned public involvement. As the Reconnecting process took shape, local steering committees and Harwood advisors focused on how to foster a climate where everyone would feel secure enough to contribute, without stifling the sort of hard criticisms that were heard on talk radio and that were needed to motivate change. In practice, maintaining civil discourse and encouraging open-mindedness rested on a combination of gentle "ground rules"[13] and the occasional intervention of the meeting's facilitator—typically a local resident and member of the steering committee.

Skepticism was the natural response to yet one more call for "reasoned discussion," and it was easy to caricature the idealistic image that the Reconnecting gatherings could work as the bridge from talk radio to the Greek polis. Some predicted that the exercise would amount to little more than a "feel good" talk show, with no more depth or solidity than the negatives of talk radio. "I expect it to be kind of like when Oprah or someone walks around the room and everyone gets excited about what's being said. But I don't know how that is going to make a difference." Others worried that the rules would work so well that they would discourage engagement: "I wondered about the ground rules they gave. I thought they were OK, but I think a lot of people were intimidated by them."

To their credit, these critics were willing to give the process a try, and they were eventually convinced that their participation was worthwhile. The critic

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[13] Harwood's "Ground Rules for Staying on Track" list the following:

- Everyone participates; no one dominates.
- There are no 'right' answers....
- It's okay to disagree—everyone has a right to their own views.
- Keep an open mind....
- Focus on finding constructive solutions—not on complaining or placing blame.
- Help keep the discussion on track....
- Use the 'I can live with it' rule to help bring closure to a discussion.

worried about the intimidating effect of the rules noted later that "I felt like people at the beginning of the meeting last night were holding back. But they started to get more comfortable with each other as time went on. . . . We had a broad-based group of people [at the meeting]. There were people who are involved in the schools . . . and the people looking in on the schools [from the outside]. So we had all these viewpoints. Hopefully, this will eventually help us all understand each other better." The image of the discussion as a process in which it takes time to learn and become comfortable playing by the rules was captured by a steering committee member from Greenville: "At the first meeting, it didn't take long to see what people's agendas were. . . . For example, one person was adamant about attendance lines and wanted to keep the school limited to the community. [But] by the end of the meeting, those with different opinions could talk to each other."

The members of the steering committees were hardly immune from doubts about the prospects for civility and open-mindedness. A steering committee member from Greenville doubted the wisdom of making the leaders hold their tongue, especially when they felt that participants were wrong: "We have been grappling with what the role of the steering committee should be, and we haven't yet decided what that role should be. A difficult part of the process is also the most beneficial: It's hard not to impose your views, but listening helps you learn where people are." In the end, the steering committees appear to have felt that the balance had been struck in the right place. A steering committee member from Greenville noted that "the ground rules pretty much nipped in the bud any person who was extremely irate or verbal one way or the other. We made clear that it was not a bashing situation, but [the discussions still revealed] bad experiences . . . on both sides from parents and teachers." A steering committee member from Horry County reflected after the last Community Conversation that "the model worked well for us. I was especially grateful for it in the middle of the process when we were floundering. . . . It's not that we never got off the track . . . but participants needed to vent and once we got through that, they returned to the goal of the discussion. [The process] emphasizes that everyone should have the opportunity to speak, and you should bring as many people as possible into the conversation."

When we asked participants about their views of the discussion (particularly in cases where we had observed the conversation as a whole and were able to focus on specific issues or exchanges), we found most of them impressed with how little difficulty or resistance there had been to keeping a civil discourse going. One

African American participant in Horry County, who had spoken relatively little in the Community Conversations, noted that "I can sit in a meeting and maybe not say much. But the one thing that I say may set things in motion. You're going to have some people who are talkers and some people who are doers. . . . But it was important that we had respect for each other. . . . That's how we're going to succeed." Another participant from Greenville provided a revealing image of the process of the dialogue.

> The [way the] Reconnecting meeting [worked] was that everyone could make any statement they wanted to, and the facilitators put it on the board for further discussion. You weren't allowed to be derogatory to people, whether they were other conversation participants or even public officials. But we were allowed to say negative things—for instance, to complain about school or community programs or how the school district was conducting its business—and not be judged for it. The facilitators would follow up, and others could comment. Then we would go back the following week and rehash what we had put on the board, make sure everyone still accepts all of it. We had a real conversation with people from different sides and different backgrounds talking over their views. It was very different from public hearings like the School Board holds, where you just get one comment after another and no interaction.

Asked what they had learned from the Reconnecting conversations, many of the participants reminded us that they had been following education and community politics for some time, even if they had not been personally involved, and that most of the fundamental issues were continuing ones. Nevertheless, each could point to some information they had gained or opinion they had re-thought after taking part in the Community Conversations. One of the most modest but profound statements of the Reconnecting process's potential came from a working class African American woman in Horry County.

> One of the most important pieces of knowledge that came out in the Community Conversations is that people don't know that everyone doesn't have what they have. Parents from schools in middle-class areas take it for granted that there are computers in the school, and libraries, and access to special programs over cable or the Internet; that homelife is comfortable, with enough food for everyone and clothing for special events, and quiet places for all the children to study; that families read to the little children and can talk to them about their homework. But lots of poor families have none of those things, their children are worried about whether they can go to school looking barely respectable. . . . [I]n some families, parents are essentially illiterate—they are interested in their children's education and they want very much for their children to do better and succeed but they know they can't do much to help them. I don't know whether these conversations helped these well-off people to see how different the situation is for poor

and especially Black people, but that's what came through for me, and I hope others learned it too.

Another participant, a life-long resident of Greenville County and an experienced teacher, reflected on a different sort of lesson.

> I guess I would have to say that I did not learn much that was brand-new or surprising from the Community Conversations. . . . But the lesson of the conversations was not just transmitting new information that no one might have heard before. It is also important that the conversations showed that so many people are committed—this makes me quite optimistic. In attending the conversations I met people who are concerned with the schools and willing to be active to try to support them. The other thing the conversation showed was the capacity of ordinary people here in Greenville to get together to discuss complicated and contentious issues, and to do so in a constructive way that actually led to good ideas for understanding the problems and trying to find solutions. Everyone's views got a hearing, and I believe everybody feels that they were treated fairly. At the same time I don't want to minimize the importance of the discussion around the table, not only for the other people but also for me.

Finally, the reflections of a participant from Greenville, an upper-middle-class homemaker and former teacher, summarized a reaction that was apparent in several of the local public meetings in Greenville as well as in Horry County.

> I was initially skeptical that people would listen, and I worried a great deal that any of the school district administrators or maybe even the school board would listen to the Reconnecting group. So, although I was committed to working on the project, I wasn't terribly optimistic about whether the discussions would succeed, or whether anyone would take seriously whatever we produced. What I found was that our own group was a huge success, as a place for serious discussion and exchange of ideas. Everyone was respectful; they listened to each other and we had a real conversation. I've made a number of new friends, and I'm going to keep working with those people, and perhaps even see a few of them socially.

Some of the members of this group have been in touch with each other since the close of the Reconnecting process's first stage (and the presentation of the agreement to the school board), and this respondent planned to take the lead at getting in touch with a school in a poor section of the city of Greenville, to begin setting up a cooperative arrangement in which the PTAs at the two schools would exchange information about school-community programs, and the PTA in the middle-class neighborhood would help lobby for more school district and private support for the inner city school. In Horry County, several of the local public meetings had

generated similar interest in working on their own to build community support for the schools. In both districts, steering committee members saw these local groups as prime sources for the leadership group who would carry forward the implementation stage of the Reconnecting process.

Finally, the lessons to be drawn from the Reconnecting experience of civil public discussion were not limited to the parent and community participants. Organizers from the School Boards Association held that a key test of the process would be whether their own members—elected school board members and district administrators—learned and changed the way they related to the public. "This will be a learning process, not a matter of carrying out set plans. School board members often don't recognize that they represent the people. In the past, they assumed that whatever brought them to the board was what they would do; they got there because they have been lightning rods, not listeners. It's not that way anymore. . . . We see Reconnecting addressing these needs for change."

Credibility

As we noted above, some of the many deliberative exercises that have been mounted over the past few years have had discussion as their essential purpose. The participants in a discussion of the future of Social Security, for instance, might change their minds—they would surely be better informed—and policy elites and government officials might be influenced by the issues raised in the discussion, but the process was not motivated by the prospect of producing direct and visible change in the policy. For virtually all the participants in the Reconnecting process in South Carolina, on the other hand, it was not the abstract attractions of deliberation in itself, but rather the desire to influence school and community policy and politics that motivated their participation. The outcome was an essential part of the reason for their participation.

Initially, and through the course of the Community Conversations, the outcome on which the discussion participants focused was the "agreement" on what was needed to reconnect schools and communities in their district. The task of imagining where they would like the community and the district to be in five or ten years, identifying current strengths and weaknesses and mapping out what would be needed to achieve their aspirations, presented an unusually demanding job—even for citizens and district leaders who had participated in school-based strategic planning exercises. Once the agreement was drafted, however, many of the

participants reported that the sense of fulfillment was soon joined by the gnawing realization that "all this won't make any difference if we can't convince the school district and other officials, as well as more of our fellow citizens, to begin working to implement the agreement."

Our research persuades us that yoking together the prospect of political change and the process of deliberation is a defining feature of the move from the theoretical ideal to practical deliberation. For the participants in South Carolina, the outcome—the need to find a way to improve the connections between schools and their communities—was the reason for their involvement. The Community Conversations had not yet reached closure when participants began speculating and informally researching the probability that the process would have its intended effects; and some publicly expressed the sentiment that they would regard the willingness of the school district and government officials to consider and act on the agreement as an appropriate test of these local political authorities' claim to legitimacy.

While this research suggests that public involvement in deliberation depends to a significant degree on the potential outcomes of the discussion, we are also aware of strong arguments in the theoretical literature that emphasize the danger that a politicized process would undermine precisely those key aspects of deliberation—the opportunity for reflection, the adherence to norms of fair-mindedness, and the criterion of mutual acceptability that defines public reason—that give the deliberative forum its legitimacy and authority. Our research does not yet allow us to address the trade-off between reflective deliberation and the desire for political change. The next section carries the story forward, however, tracing the Reconnecting process through its next step, outlining the agreements reached in each district and noting the initial reaction of public authorities to those agreements.

Variation in the Reconnecting Process and Its Outcomes

Anyone familiar with the process of local implementation will not be surprised to learn that communities differed in how Reconnecting was implemented. Harwood's design was adapted and modified by each steering committee, so that the basic framework was still evident, but key components varied. Table 1 summarizes some major differences in the process.

Table 1

The Reconnecting Process

	Greenville	Horry	Richland 2
Time frame[a]	10 months	6 months	3 months
Number of public meetings	12	25	5
Attendance at public meetings[b]	250-300	400-450	150-300
Number of Community Conversation sessions	3-4 held in each of 3 regions of the county; 2 countywide	5	5
Number of newspaper articles[c]	12-*Greenville News*	34-*Myrtle Beach Sun Times*	15-*The State*

[a] Elapsed time from the first public meeting to completion of the agreement.

[b] Estimates obtained from the steering committees and the newspapers.

[c] This entry is for the major newspaper in the area that agreed to chronicle the process. In addition, some neighborhood weeklies also ran articles on Reconnecting. In Greenville, a conservative newspaper, *The Times Examiner*, also featured several articles portraying Reconnecting as an effort by the education establishment to rebuild support for "government-operated schools."

To a large extent, Horry County's process came closest to what the organizers envisioned in terms of the time frame and role of the newspaper. However, the local decision to schedule 25 public meetings came as a surprise to the state organizers. As indicated in the previous section, the steering committee sought to convene numerous meetings throughout the county as a way to make Reconnecting more inclusive, and the members felt that the total turnout for the public meetings justified the additional effort on their part. Although the steering committee in Greenville scheduled fewer public meetings, and held one in the food court of a local shopping mall that attracted more than 80 people, the members used the same reasoning as their Horry counterparts in deciding to begin with three regional Community Conversations, and then bring the groups together after they had each drafted separate agreements. They too felt that in a large county, people would be more willing to participate actively in meetings held in areas with which they naturally identified, and when they came together, they would find that the concerns and solutions identified were quite similar across the entire county.

Greenville's and Richland 2's deviation from the organizers' assumed five-month timeline for the first phase of Reconnecting is largely explained by the differing perceptions of the two steering committee chairs. The Greenville chair felt

strongly that the process should not be rushed; so, for example, he scheduled additional public meetings after the first round because he felt that not all parts of the county had been covered; he also agreed to additional sessions of the regional Community Conversations if participants felt they needed more time. The Richland 2 chair, on the other hand, wanted an agreement before the winter holidays, fearing that the process would lose momentum otherwise.[14]

The difference in newspaper coverage partly reflects differing approaches to civic journalism by the chains that own the three newspapers. Gannett, the owner of the *Greenville News*, emphasizes community outreach, but it has a less comprehensive approach to civic journalism than Knight-Ridder, the owner of *The State* and the *Myrtle Beach Sun News*. The *Greenville News* also had four different reporters covering education in just 18 months, three of whom covered Reconnecting at various times. *The State*, on the other hand, had the same reporter covering Richland 2 during the first phase of Reconnecting, and she continues to cover the district today. Like the *Greenville News*, the *Sun News* has young, inexperienced reporters, but the editors saw Reconnecting as a training opportunity for them. As one editor noted, "internally, we hope that Reconnecting will help develop different listening and reporting skills among our reporters, and that they will interact differently with citizens." One of the ways the *Sun News* used Reconnecting as a training opportunity was to have the entire staff, including the sports reporter, cover the 25 public meetings and report on them not in traditional news articles, but rather through verbatim transcripts of an entire meeting so readers would know exactly what was said by everyone who spoke.[15]

As striking as these differences are, two other dimensions are more significant for understanding how deliberative forums can vary. These distinctions return us to the dimensions depicted in Figure 1, between deliberation as public input to decisions by policy elites and as an impetus for actions taken by citizens, and

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[14] Despite the differences in elapsed time for completing the first phase, all three communities are currently at the same point of just beginning to plan how they will implement the agreement. The hiatus in the two districts where the agreement was completed during the last academic year is due to several factors: summer vacation, the steering committees needing to "recharge their batteries" and recruit new members, a May bond election in Richland 2, and a real estate development controversy in Horry that consumed much of the school district leadership's time for several months.

[15] Although the editorial, leadership at the *Sun News* reported consciously trying to avoid influencing the Reconnecting process, some respondents characterized the newspaper as a "partner" with the school district in Reconnecting. That impression probably came from the fact that an editor at the *Sun News* participated in selecting the steering committee and the letter of invitation to potential steering committee members was jointly signed by the *Sun News'* publisher and the school superintendent.

between civic volunteerism and a press for government to act. As indicated in the introduction, the two sets of categories are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent endpoints on a continuum, and in the case of Reconnecting, Greenville and Horry Counties illustrate two different points where deliberative forums might fall.[16]

In Horry, the relationship between the school district and the Reconnecting steering committee was close, and respondents talked about the initiative as a shared one between the school district and the citizens' group. The assistant to the superintendent for communications and planning served as the liaison to the steering committee and was viewed by its members as a colleague. The superintendent attended a number of the public meetings and all the Community Conversations, as did several members of the school board. The superintendent and school board members made it clear that they were in attendance to listen, and did not speak unless they were asked questions. However, at the last session of the Community Conversation, the superintendent made a formal presentation summarizing the concerns she had heard expressed during Reconnecting, and outlined what the district was doing to improve student learning.

The agreement reached in Horry (see Appendix for all of the Reconnecting agreements) emphasized forms of civic volunteerism to support the schools, including asking business to promote greater parental involvement and "help schools develop good customer service practices." The agreement also outlined what the schools should do to be more responsive to the community—for example, "using schools as a focal point for community programs," and "expanding and redefining the roles of school improvement councils and advisory boards to make them more inclusive of the community." In several places, the agreement stressed the overarching theme that the school district and community need to understand each other's points of view better and to develop a shared sense of ownership and responsibility for the schools.

In the five months after the agreement was reached, the Horry steering committee was largely inactive, but the superintendent and the school board moved quickly to implement parts of the agreement and to respond to concerns they had heard expressed in the Reconnecting meetings. These actions ranged from fixing the

[16] In this discussion, we focus on Greenville and Horry. However, both the process in Richland 2 and the resulting agreement are similar to Horry's in how Reconnecting was regarded by the district leadership and in the agreement's emphasis on civic volunteerism.

overlap between school advisory groups and school site councils and the school board deciding to streamline its policy manual, to enlisting a local business to help implement a customer service model in the schools, opening the schools after hours for more community activities, and changing bus schedules so that students in rural areas would not be riding them for so long each day.

In contrast, the steering committee in Greenville operated quite independently of the school district. The district liaison assisted the steering committee with the logistics of arranging meetings and preparing mailings, but neither the superintendent nor members of the school board attended any of the Reconnecting public meetings or Community Conversations. Since the first of the public meetings was held just prior to a school board election, the steering committee recommended that board members not attend the meetings so they would not become a platform for political candidates.[17] The steering committee maintained this stance throughout the process. Its members believed it was important for the committee to operate autonomously of the school district, and felt that the process would not have been the same had board members and district leadership been present during the Reconnecting deliberations. One member of the steering committee went so far as to say that "the school boards in the other communities killed the Reconnecting process . . . in those other districts, they have captured the process." In contrast, the chair of the Greenville committee, in presenting the agreement to the school board, characterized it as "a report from the people" (Jones, 1999).

To a large extent, the Greenville agreement is similar to Horry's in its emphasis on shared responsibility among parents, educators, business, and other members of the community, in its concern for planned community growth, and in its hope for accountable schools operating with equitable resources and providing opportunities for improved student learning. Like Horry's, the Greenville agreement also calls for increased volunteerism by local citizens in support of the schools. However, Greenville's agreement differs from Horry's in one major way: It is considerably more political in its calls for possible restructuring of the school district, the establishment of at least one at-large school board member, the inclusion of the school district in county planning decisions, and the need to "reinvigorate Greenville's political base where politicians are held accountable." This last point reflects a larger theme running throughout the agreement. The drafters of the

[17] However, some challengers did attend the meetings, and several defeated candidates continued to participate in Reconnecting after the election.

agreement portray the school district's relationship with the public as fractured and troubled. The Horry agreement suggests that the school district and the community need to understand each other better, and that the schools could do a better job of accepting the public on its own terms, rather than just in ways defined by educators. However, the overall tone of the agreement is non-accusatory and collaborative. The Greenville agreement, on the other hand, sets a different tone. It talks of "poor management of the school system," "a lack of trust," and implies that the school district has not been entirely forthcoming about how it spends its tax money.

At this point, it is too early to tell what will happen with the agreement in Greenville. However, the initial response is quite different than in Horry. Members of the school board are taking a "wait and see" attitude. Some suggested that the agreement's major recommendations (e.g., about better communication with the public) are already being worked on by the district, but that the Reconnecting participants were ignorant of these efforts because they had excluded the board from their deliberations. Another member suggested that the agreement was vague and unhelpful; another argued that Reconnecting would have little impact unless it joined with more influential groups, such as the Chamber of Commerce, that are also making recommendations about how to improve the schools. The steering committee leadership, on the other hand, remains enthusiastic and determined to begin work on its recommendations, arguing that:

> Our credibility is on the line in putting the agreement out there. If the school board or county council don't want to move on the agreement, then we might go public around some issues and do it ourselves.

Horry and Greenville represent different kinds of deliberative forums as defined by their purpose and outcomes, although neither is a pure type. Nevertheless, Reconnecting in Horry functioned as a source of citizen input for policy decisions made by political elites in a way that Greenville did not, and its agreement largely advocates civic volunteerism and incremental changes in school district policy and practice, rather than a press for fundamental political changes.

The explanations for these differences lie in the historical-institutional context of each community. A major characteristic that distinguishes the two communities is the level of trust in government. Although our data are limited to interviews with knowledgeable respondents and to comments made at the Reconnecting meetings, the low levels of trust in Greenville and the more positive attitude toward local

government in Horry—particularly the school district—emerged as a pervasive theme. In Greenville, local politics was portrayed as divisive, public officials as secretive and distrusted by citizens, and citizens as feeling they did not know how public funds were spent and therefore, unwilling to pay taxes. A small sampling of comments by Reconnecting participants illustrates these sentiments:

> The negative voice in Greenville county started with the anti-tax people, but it goes deeper than that. You never read what these people are for, only what they are against. They have no answers for what should be done. A big segment of the community listens to them, and will believe what they say before they believe what the authorities say are the facts . . .
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> . . . the county council and authorities are clever at baiting the extremists so they fight and there's no coherent public position. They go on and do what they want. The school board is not trusted much more—they don't listen or else they manipulate the agenda so the testimony at public hearings gives them what they want. It's because the political authorities around here aren't trustworthy that the Greenville agreement focused on politics and policy.
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> . . . local politicians seem to cater to special interest groups even more than they do in national politics. This is especially obvious when you look at the development of new housing subdivisions—which seems to be the main thing government does here in the Greenville area. Going to the public hearings or meetings about this kind of thing is a waste of time, unless you have influential people or celebrities on your side. We had a situation here where they wanted to build a hotel out on the road. People on our block wanted to go down to the county planning commission. I told them it would be a waste of time unless we had someone who was president or vice-president of a large company. You can't expect people to participate in government when they know they are not going to have any effect. The developers and the bankers are always there at those meetings, and they're probably also talking to the politicians and planning commission people in private. Politicians need them to finance their campaigns, so the bankers and developers have access that ordinary people don't.

Although participants distinguished between county government and the school district and were less critical of the latter, they also considered it to be remote and unresponsive. Not surprisingly, school board members recognized that this perception exists and attributed it partly to the role of the local newspaper and inexperienced reporters who "seemed to be more concerned with discovering

scandal than with informing the public about how the school district goes about its business." In expressing her regret at not being allowed to attend the Reconnecting meetings, one school board member commented, "I'm a good member; I work hard; I take time from my family; we're conservative with [public] money. Assuming we're bad managers is used as an excuse for not paying more in taxes. They have an idea that we're all crooks."

In organizing Reconnecting, then, the steering committee took into account the institutional context in which the initiative would occur. While the agreement offered strategies for changing how local political institutions interact with citizens, the process by which it was reached did little to close the historical chasm between citizens and their elected representatives.

The level of trust in local government among Reconnecting participants in Horry varied. Some characterized county government in much the same way as their counterparts in Greenville—viz., that it is overly responsive to developers who make large campaign contributions and is distant from average citizens—whereas others were more trusting and positive in their assessment. Regardless of their views of county government, however, the general consensus among Reconnecting participants, expressed in meetings and interviews, was that the school district could be trusted. People talked about the superintendent and school board as making mistakes and not always accomplishing as they would like, but nonetheless "trying to do what's right." A number of people specifically mentioned that the current board was the best in recent memory. Participants wanted the school district to do a better job of improving student achievement, and some participants, particularly African Americans and parents of students with disabilities, expressed concern that some students were not being treated equitably. But throughout the process, it was clear that there was a strong reservoir of trust, with participants assuming that the school district leadership was sincere and working in the public interest.

The differing levels of citizen trust are partly the product of each area's historical development, with Horry's geographical isolation during the early nineteenth century leading to a more populist, open politics that continues today, even in the face of considerable growth and the influx of newcomers.[18] In contrast,

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[18] Horry County is currently experiencing what may be a major turning point that will test the openness of its politics. Like the Greenville district and other school districts in South Carolina, Horry County school district has not traditionally been "at the table" when development and taxation

Greenville's politics is less open, but to the extent that it is visible to average citizens, it appears more rancorous. Alternative newspapers and local talk radio have provided a venue for a variety of groups, including anti-tax organizations and religious conservatives, to act as constant critics of government.

Consistent with the broader political culture, the superintendent in Horry has been able to use Reconnecting as a policy tool in a way that district leadership in Greenville probably could not. The superintendent is implementing a reform agenda that focuses on the individual school as the primary site for improving student achievement. At the same time, she is faced with a district where each school has considerable discretion, and where school improvement councils had often become rubber stamps for principals. Cracks in the facade of shared governance became clear when a controversy erupted over a school schedule that a principal had changed without consulting parents. Consequently, prior to Reconnecting, the superintendent had begun to rebuild the infrastructure that connected individual schools with their communities. The district moved to ensure that all eligible parents could run and vote for membership on the councils, and then provided training for those who were elected.

Reconnecting became another component of the superintendent's overall strategy and served several different purposes. First, it provided key intelligence about public concerns and preferences that could not be obtained as effectively in any other venue, and that could inform board and administration policy decisions. Second, in a county where 80% of the adults have no direct contact with the schools because many are retired "empty nesters," Reconnecting offered the potential of an expanded base of people who feel connected to the schools. Finally, Reconnecting was a source of leverage for the superintendent over the district's 43 principals, some of whom are less open to public engagement than she, but who are key to the success of her reform agenda. All the principals attended at least one Community Conversation, and they subsequently met with some of the participants. The result was that they heard what public expectations are, but they also now feel less

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decisions have been made. However, the superintendent and school board president have recently questioned what they consider to be the adverse impact on the schools of a proposal by the county's largest land developer to direct sales tax revenue from the schools to infrastructure development for a mall that the developer plans to build. In raising the issue publicly and hiring their own consultants to assess the proposal, these two women have taken a major step toward making the school district a more equal player in county economic development decisions, and they have been able to do so partly because of the trust they enjoy in the community.

threatened by the public's involvement because they realize that a base of support exists for the schools.

In suggesting that the variation in purpose and outcome between Reconnecting in Greenville and Horry is best explained by differences in the historical-institutional context, we are arguing that those local deliberative forums where some type of action is expected are path-dependent, and that generic models must be adapted to local circumstances if they are to be implemented successfully. However, this conclusion requires two caveats. First, we are not implying that the structure of Reconnecting was somehow predetermined, and that the steering committees and district leadership had little choice except to proceed as they did. Rather, we are suggesting that the steering committee in Greenville understood its community and adapted the Harwood model to the local political culture, and that in Horry, the superintendent recognized that there was sufficient trust for her to use Reconnecting as part of her leadership strategy. At the same time, the Reconnecting process in each community could have been made more like the other (and probably more effective), even within the broad parameters that were adopted. For example, there is no question that the Community Conversations in Greenville operated in a serious information vacuum about the school district's scope of authority and its policies and about county government. If the school district was deemed an untrustworthy source, some arrangement might have been made to have information provided by a neutral third party (e.g., an organization like the League of Women Voters or an institute at a local university). Similarly, the level of ownership and commitment among Reconnecting participants in Horry County might have been heightened if there had been a stronger link between the public meetings (where turnout was high and more diverse) and subsequent events, and if steering committee members had put as much effort into keeping in touch with Community Conversation participants as their counterparts in Greenville. In other words, the historical and institutional context influenced the basic organization of Reconnecting in each community, but the organizers had considerable flexibility within those parameters.

A second caveat relates to the relative effectiveness of the model that emerged in each community. Clearly, judgments about the effectiveness of Reconnecting as a base for community action cannot be made for several years. But it is also the case that even now the models in Greenville and Horry each demonstrate unique advantages and disadvantages that are not only mirror opposites of each other, but that also represent the kinds of trade-offs designers of deliberative forums need to

consider. For example, in Greenville, it is difficult to predict what will happen as a result of Reconnecting, not only because of the school board's noncommittal response to the agreement, but also because the agreement calls for fundamental political change of the kind that is always hard to achieve. At the same time, the steering committee and the Community Conversation participants feel a strong sense of ownership, and many are committed to moving forward with the agreement. The challenge for them will be to overcome the public cynicism that pervades public life in Greenville, and to convince other citizens that they are a legitimate force for change in the community. In Horry County, the achievements thus far and the future challenges are different. The movement from conversation to action in Horry was fast, but it has largely been action by political elites. It appears that the sense of ownership among the Reconnecting participants is lower than in Greenville, and respondents there indicated that the school district will need to take the lead in helping to reconstitute the steering committee and in organizing the "civic brigades" that will implement the civic volunteerism parts of the agreement.

Conclusions

The experience of Reconnecting thus far confirms both its promise as a strategy for strengthening the bonds between schools and communities, and the hopes of those who believe that practical deliberation is possible in local communities. Yet two questions remain unanswered: Can deliberative forums such as Reconnecting work in larger and more heterogenous communities, and can such forums be sustained in ways that will allow them to serve as foundations for either civic volunteerism or citizen political action?

The answer to the first question will emerge only as Reconnecting and other kinds of deliberative forums move beyond the status of pilot projects and are implemented on a widespread basis. Likewise, the second question will not be answered until at least a few deliberative forums and the organizational apparatus surrounding them have had time to become institutionalized, or to foster the growth of new civic attitudes and commitments. In education, the most likely templates for long-term deliberative problem solving are charter schools and local school-site councils. Although most research on charter schools and school site councils has focused on other aspects, some recent research has assessed their effectiveness as sites for practical deliberation (e.g., Fung, 1999) and, like our assessment of Reconnecting, has found them to be promising, but highly variable. Although their

longevity may be more tenuous, community-wide forums are also critical to a healthy education politics. One of the strengths of Reconnecting is that it encouraged participants to look beyond their own schools and neighborhoods to understand the condition of those living in quite different circumstances and to conceive of the public good in terms of the larger community.

If deliberative forums can be sustained in education, at the school and community levels, one important role they might play is as a focal point for the design and implementation of reform policies. For example, one can imagine deliberative forums as venues for public discussions about educational standards. Not only would deliberative norms ensure that disparate views about what students should know could be aired in a civil discussion, but they would also increase the likelihood that the public would accept the resulting standards as legitimate. Similarly, a community confronted with accountability data suggesting the need for different approaches to teaching and learning could use a deliberative forum as a problem-solving mechanism, on the assumption that deliberation will identify a wider range of possible solutions and increase the likelihood of a widespread buy-in to whatever strategies are selected. Certainly deliberation offers the potential for a broader segment of the community sharing responsibility for improving schools.

Like others who study deliberation, we came to this project hopeful of its potential, but skeptical that deliberation can live up to expectations as a practical tool of democratic participation and decision making. The Reconnecting experience makes us optimistic. The dual challenges of bringing the poor and the disenfranchised to the table and sustaining effective participation over the long haul remain. Nevertheless, a deliberative strategy such as Reconnecting still represents a marked improvement over the status quo for engaging a broad segment of the community in the work of educating children.

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APPENDIX

Reconnecting Agreements

Greenville County

Horry County

Richland 2

July 22, 1999
Final Agreement

Our Agreement

Reconnecting Communities & Schools
Greenville South Carolina Conversations

Preamble: We, a diverse group of people from all walks of life, met to talk about our community and public schools. Our ideas are grounded in the notion that public schools play a vital role in our community and that the community must play a similar role in public schools.

The Community we want...

The community is defined as a local area uniquely defined by its positive elements—
Its citizens, its industries, and its institutions. What we want is:

- Parents and community actively involved and supportive of schools
- Parents and community accountable for their actions
- Planned community growth that prepares for educational needs
- Good communication between citizens and all government
- A community that values education

What we want for public schools

- Responsible schools and school district
- Strong and relevant curriculum
- Open communication
- Sufficient and equitable resources
- Schools accountable for their actions
- Sufficient planning for community growth
- Small community based schools

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What needs to happen to address this situation

1. More community and parental involvement
   - Enlist support for this initiative
   - Communicate the Reconnecting Communities & Schools initiative to community members.
   - Volunteerism that is beneficial to both those who volunteer as well as those who benefit from the volunteering. (A program for volunteering that encourages participation and is rewarding to all.)

2. Improved communications at all levels within the county
   - Facilitate communications between parents, staff, and community, by using the web site and mass media. (i.e. TV, Radio, Newspapers, Civic Organizations, etc.)

3. More positive interaction between schools, parents, and community
   - The local schools must be receptive and plan a significant role in the reconnecting process.
   - Good employee relations among the employees of the school district are critical to reconnecting.
   - Create a mechanism to hold parents accountable for the behavior of their children in public schools.

4. More responsive school district
   - Examine options for restructuring the organization of the school district to better facilitate reconnecting communities and schools.
   - Neighborhood schools will foster parental ownership of the system.
   - People with strong leadership skills filling administrative positions.
   - Administrators who have up-to-date classroom experience.
   - Smaller administration
   - Develop an enabling structure instead of a "Top down" structure.

5. Better planning
   - On all matters concerning public education, government bodies are required, before implementation, to share information, to coordinate issues, to conduct and make public an educational impact analysis, to ensure compliance with standards.
   - The model for planned growth must include education in the overall county growth planning process. (Dial in school capacity as a key input similar to water, sewer, and other factors in the formula for planning.)
   - Balance the distribution of assets.
   - We need an organization that holds these pieces together.

6. Better understanding of the School District operations.
   - Establish a communication process that ensures accurate information across the board.
   - Use technology, i.e., televise live school board meetings, to enhance communications between schools and the community.
   - An annual explanation and full disclosure made to the citizens of Greenville County as to how tax revenues are received and spent. (Must be communicated in lay person language.)

7. More business involvement
   - Employers should be sensitive to the importance and impact that parental and community involvement have on the success of public education.
   - Value all positions in business and industry as a part of an interwoven system.
   - Tax credits and other incentives for business.
   - Public relations and public recognition for businesses that get involved.
   - Coordination of business leaders and educators.

Conditions needed to make progress

- Establish clear, open, formal, channels of communication between the county planning commission and the school district. An advocate/liaison for schools is needed on the planning commission.
- Remove the "us-them" mentality and tear down the real and perceived walls caused by bureaucracy.
- Recognition of achievements to develop a sense of pride and accomplishment.
- Responsibility and accountability—School staff accountable to parents; Parents recognized as those who are responsible for student's actions.
- The community and school district need to feel empowered and turn the tide of apathy.
- Mutual awareness of community and educational needs so we can mesh community and school needs with available resources.
- An emphasis on academic excellence. High academic standards that strengthen the community.
- Reduce the perceived gap between college and career pathways.
- Establish at least one at-large School Board member.

How we plan to fulfill our aspirations

1. Create a group to develop options for structuring the School District of Greenville County to be better connected to the community.
   - We would like to create an ideal, effective school district and schools model from scratch—no holds barred. If we did not have a school district, what kind of and how many school districts would we create.
   - People need to have choices with checks and balances to ensure fairness.
   - Consider smaller, community-based schools.
   - Explore early age preparation and opportunities.
   - Equality and growth of schools that is energized by competition and cooperation.
   - Recommend that a professional Human Resource function be established within the Greenville County School system.

2. We will meet with the Chairman of the Planning Commission, Chairman of the County Council, the school district facilities planner, and the Chairman of the School Board in a joint meeting for the purpose of learning how the overall planning process incorporates education in its formula.
   - Create a sound, long-range plan with time frames.
   - Reinvigorate Greenville's political base where politicians are held accountable.

3. Develop a districtwide code of conduct and critical rules that are consistently enforced by principals and teachers who have the authority and backing from parents, administration, and the school board.

4. Schools need to have adequate funding.

5. Use the total community agreement to create actionable items at the local school level in which people will want to be involved while feeling both welcome and appreciated.
   - Propose a pilot program to establish PTA Chairs to recruit and coordinate community volunteers to address needs identified by local schools.
   - Develop a districtwide data base of volunteers.
   - Re-identify Greenville as one entity. (What's best for the whole of Greenville County, not just a narrow focus on issues of local interest.)
   - We would like to continue this dialog process on additional issues and involve greater numbers of people. We feel that we could now get greater participation by focusing on specifics for the dialog and having well-defined objectives before asking them to get involved.

6. Request formally, more positive public recognition through mass media and personal networks and financial support for teachers. For example, sponsorships for continuing education and/or community service activities such as leadership programs.
   - Develop individual pride in yourself before it is seen/shared by others.
     - Recognition of our achievements (intelligence and talents).
     - Need support structures for teachers and school staff from parents and media.

Our Agreement

[Horry County]

Preamble: Here are our ideas for how to reconnect our community and public schools. Our ideas are grounded in the notion that public schools play a vital role in our community and that the community must play a role in public schools.

The community we want...

- Planned growth rather than sprawl
- Planned communities with limited high density development
- People feel safe in their homes
- Children getting a quality education
- Diversified economy with industry in all areas, not just in industrial parks
- Economy where children can remain in Horry County and get good jobs
- Citizens able to have voice in the type of businesses that locate in their neighborhoods
- More active, involved participation by everyone
- For interaction that takes place inside of schools to be carried outside of school
- Better health and social services
- More businesses and community people involved in the schools
- Diverse communities with diverse opportunities
- Better transportation
- More recreational opportunities

What we want for public schools...

- Attract quality teachers and staff and keep them
- Diversity in teaching staff
- Reduction in student-teacher ratio
- Improvement from "48th in the nation"
- Celebration of diverse learning styles
- Less reliance on standardized tests
- Make academics and classroom performance top priority
- More direct parental involvement in schools
- All employees playing role in education of students at school
- Quality programs for special needs children
- More business and community people involved in the schools
- Safety and security
- Equity across the system

The situation we face...

- Need for effective, two-way communication between school and community to help bring about positive attitudes

- Lack of parental and community involvement with accountability

- Need for increased priority and commitment to children from the community

Why...

- Difference between public's perception and schools' perception of what's happening in schools.

- Change in traditional family unit
- Socio-economic difficulties
- Weak parenting skills by some
- Priorities towards children
- Mobile society and lack of time
- Clearly articulated expectations

- Lack of shared value and ownership for education
- Increase in discipline problems/social problems
- Lack of equal access to programs and services

What needs to happen to address this situation...

- There needs to be more opportunities for parents, business, and the community to get involved with the schools to develop a deeper understanding of each other's point of view.
- Links need to be established between schools and other groups and organizations to form relationships that complement each other and take advantage of programs that may already be in place.
- We need a shared sense of direction.
- Every contact between the schools and the public should be viewed as an opportunity for schools to project a positive image and help build a sense of ownership by the public.

Conditions needed to make progress...

- Create a shared sense of shared value for education; make education a priority in the community.
- Make schools more welcoming/customer friendly.
- Must be able to "walk our talk."
- Include people who don't have children in schools as well as parents.
- Parents need to read to children.
- Employers should ask students for transcript and attendance record before hiring
- Need to forge a sense of ownership of schools with all stakeholders.
- Make sure that students get a quality education with skills for post-secondary education or careers.
- Channels of communication should be clear.
- Perception of public schools needs to improve.
- Time and mobility keep many parents from being involved.

We plan to fulfill our aspirations...

- By identifying a parent representative for each classroom who can be linked with other parents through family school coordinators and other means
- By inviting business and industry leaders to visit schools and civic clubs to meet in schools
- By asking businesses to adopt classrooms and assist with parent involvement promotion through notices on marquees and paychecks
- By continuing to meet regularly with the Superintendent or other district representatives to receive information that can be shared with others as ambassadors for public education
- By using students to make public service announcements promoting school successes
- By asking businesses to form a roundtable of their public relations directors to assist with marketing public schools to help parents and the community understand and participate more with public schools
- By conducting a business/civic summit
- By reviewing the hours of school operation to allow parents to have more time with children
- By expanding and redefining the roles of schools improvement councils and advisory boards to make them more inclusive of community
- By asking businesses to help schools develop good customer service practices, customer surveys, and customer-friendly environments
- By asking schools to join local chambers of commerce to help schools view themselves as businesses view them
- By using schools as a focal point for community programs

Our Agreement, Richland 2

Preamble: Here are our ideas for how to reconnect our community and public schools. Our ideas are grounded in the notion that public schools play a vital role in our community and that the community must play a role in public schools.

The Community we want:

- Well-planned growth
- Good business opportunities and stronger business/educational partnerships
- Best (most competitive) schools
- Healthy, growing economy
- Expanded educational opportunities
- Expanded cultural opportunities
- Appreciation of diversity
- Safe, clean and green
- Better informed
- More stable population
- Active, vibrant, and functional
- More volunteerism

...and the public schools we want:

- High standards and a plan to meet them
- The best teachers possible
- Disciplined schools
- Better interaction with businesses
- Best use of technology
- Broader, deeper curriculum
- Ample (quality) space and buildings
- Ideal class sizes
- Safe, supportive, inviting environment
- Productive work environment

The situation we face:

- Rapid increase in student population
- Providing classroom space and reducing classroom size
- The need to attract and keep qualified teachers
- Lack of community involvement in life of schools

... and why:

- Increase development in Richland School District Two area
- Can't build schools at rate of growth of population
- Rate of growth. Low teacher pay.
- Increase in population without school-age children

- Business community does not see benefit to them of supporting schools
- Increase in discipline concerns
- Lack of structured coordination between business and schools
- Lack of consistency and respect

What needs to happen to address this situation:

- Closer coordination within RSD2 community between businesses, schools, parents and private citizens
- Continued plan for anticipated growth
- Provide staff and space to address growth needs
- Develop methods to communicate with and involve private citizens of district life of schools
- Develop aggressive recruitment plan and incentive program for veteran teachers
- Constant evaluation of curriculum to ensure relevancy in ever-changing job market... i.e. technology

...and conditions needed to make progress:

- Improve communication with community
- Gain support in community for adding necessary classroom space
- Find innovative ways to involve parents and private citizens in operation of district
- Find ways to show community advantages of being part of a quality school district
- Clearly defined vision for what we want to do and follow through on
- Emphasis on teaching and learning in small, supportive climate

How we plan to fulfill our aspirations:

We will listen to what the community has told us are the four major areas of concern.

- Resources and how we allocate them
- Overall pervasive lack of parental involvement in schools
- Reluctance of everyone to take more action due to concerns of liability
- Need for more community and business involvement in education

We will prioritize our efforts toward addressing each of these concerns.

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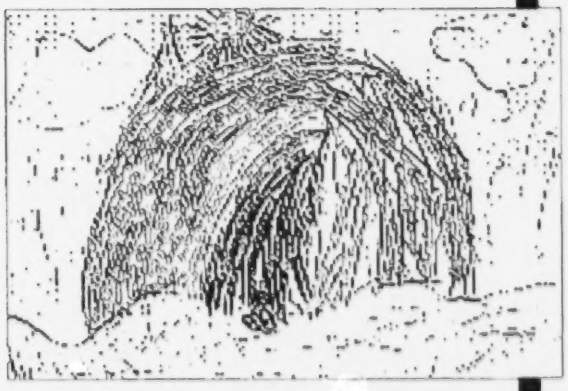

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